Futile efforts to dismiss allegations of racism are often followed by concessions that race is complex, and hence not easily definable. Whether explained as a sociohistorical process and construct, or a biological foundation, up to the 19th century, race was informed by essentialism. That is, the idea, says Appiah (2015: 3), ‘that human groups have core properties in common that explain not just their shared superficial appearances but also the deep tendencies of their moral and cultural lives’. On the one hand, racial categorisation accommodates the scientific grouping of people. On the other hand, race is used to assign inherited moral and psychological tendencies, and to explain different histories and cultures of people (Appiah, 2015). For my own understanding of race, I rely on Yancy’s (Peters, 2019: 663) conceptualisation of race as a ‘social kind’. To Yancy, the concept of race does not have a referent in the natural world – “There is no thing to which the concept of race points. So, it is a concept that is ontologically empty. Yet, it is a concept that exists. Its emergence
in the world came from Western Europe. It is a concept that is socially and historically produced and shaped by colonial desire, bad faith, domination, psychological projection, and ontological and epistemic logics that are Manichean in nature’ (Peters, 2019: 663).

The issue of race is ubiquitous to my story. It sits in every context and engagement – its presence dimmed only, at times, by other nodes of marginalisation. The colour of my skin is a source of contention not only in my own country, in which I am categorised as ‘coloured’, but in other localities for which there is no equivalent to a ‘coloured’ category. It helps to explain that as a ‘coloured’ I have been reduced to neither ‘black’ nor ‘white’. What I am is ‘not’. The burden of a ‘coloured’ identity precedes apartheid; it emanates from a historical inheritance of colonialism, assigned to people from a mixed ancestry of European and African (and later Asian). The burden sits not only in the weight of a dehumanising racial classification, but in its distorted connotations of impurity and illegitimacy, designating yet another brutalisation of identity.

My decision to ponder on race in this chapter, as a foundationally consistent discrimination, ties into the awakening of my journey as an oppressed human being in my birthplace. It was the first kind of oppression I had experienced, and until a certain age in my life, I foolishly thought it would be the only kind of oppression I would experience. My initiation into the teaching profession would signal the first of many forceful realisations about how race works, penetrates and permeates even the most subtle forms of human engagement. In a very warped way, apartheid helped to easily demarcate and identify the structures and systems of racism. When these structures were removed, it became hard (at the time) not to recognise that racism is not in need of formalised legislation. In fact, it is the absence of formalised regulations which forces racism to live in masqueraded forms, assigning to it an even more dangerous obscenity and harm.
She thought I was at the wrong school

It was on a Monday morning in 1993 (nine months before South Africa would become a democratic state) – possibly early July – I cannot be certain, but it must have taken place as learners returned to school from their June holiday. It was a cold morning. Traffic from my home to Protea High School, located in the city centre of Cape Town was not only gruelling, but meant waking up extra early to get to school by 7:30.2 My father had insisted on driving me – an insistence driven in part by amusement and in part by anxiety. I had tried to change the school at which I was meant to complete my teaching practical, but my Afrikaans lecturer had assured me that I was meant to be placed at a school which offered Afrikaans as a home language subject – given that my two teaching specialisations were English and Afrikaans. As I stepped out of the car, right in front of the entrance gate to the school, my father joked that there was still time to make a run for it. A joke I wished I had acted upon the moment the school secretary set her eyes on me.

After learning that I was a student teacher, she promptly informed me that I must be at the wrong school. Protea, she declared, did not accommodate students from the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Her choice of words offered her a deft way of telling me that the school did not accommodate ‘coloured’ or ‘black’ student teachers. It is useful to know that when UWC was initially established in 1959, it was named the University College of the Western Cape as a constituent college of the University of South Africa for people classified as ‘coloured’. The first group of 166 students enrolled in 1960. They were offered limited training for lower to middle-level positions in schools, the civil service and other institutions designed to serve a separated ‘coloured’ community. In 1970, the institution gained university status and was able to award its own degrees and diplomas.

2 Protea High School is a pseudonym.
My confused face became her bewilderment, as she processed my response that I was not from UWC, but from the University of Cape Town (UCT). She took her processing behind closed doors, as she mumbled something about having to speak to the principal. I stood waiting, until the man, identified as my mentor-teacher, arrived. He carried himself with a look that suggested either indifference or boredom. Either he had been forewarned by the presence of a ‘coloured’ student teacher waiting in the foyer, or he simply could not care, as he ushered me into the staffroom, just in time for morning briefings. At the time, I neither had the insights, nor the language to grasp that one of the most debilitating aspects of being seen in terms of my racially prescribed identity – regardless of whether I believe in it or not – is that I am constantly compelled to address my imposed exclusion before I can participate in whatever space I find myself. That morning at Protea was no different, as I anxiously tried to assess where and how to situate myself in a space that was not meant to accommodate someone like me.

The cold winter’s day did little to relieve my increasingly flushed condition, as my mentor-teacher told me to follow him to saal (assembly). I was told to sit in the gallery. Saal was a carefully orchestrated affair, involving a procession of learners carrying the (old) South African flag, followed by the dominee (pastor) and the principal, and the rest of the staff. Proceedings opened with the singing of the Nasionale Stem (old national anthem), and then a few words by the dominee. Everything about all of this, while perfectly normal in the world of Protea High School, made everything about me more abnormal. I was surrounded by the very symbols (the flag and the anthem), I had been protesting. My sense of being out-of-place was outweighed only by a dreaded sense of self-betrayal.

Matters became exceedingly absurd as my mentor-teacher mentioned that one of the learners in the class I would be teaching is the grandson of BJ (Balthazer Johannes, or John) Vorster. Vorster served as the prime minister of apartheid South Africa from 1966 to 1978, and then as its president from 1978 until 1979, when he was
forced to resign due to the ‘Information Scandal’, also nicknamed ‘Muldergate’, in reference to Cornelius Petrus (Connie) Mulder who was the Minister of Information at the time. The Information Scandal was a result of government attempts to influence international and local public opinion about the apartheid government. The government embarked on a propaganda war. It shifted about R64 million from the defence budget to undertake a series of propaganda projects, which included bribing international news agencies, purchasing the *Washington Star* newspaper, and the secret establishment of a government-controlled newspaper, *The Citizen* – a newspaper that became influential in the formation of English public opinion.

I am not sure why my mentor-teacher felt the need to point out the presence of Vorster’s grandson to me – perhaps, he too, noticed the profound irony of a ‘coloured’ (Muslim) student teacher teaching the bloodline of not only an apartheid prime minister and president, but one of the founding members of the *Ossewa-Brandwag* (ox-wagon sentinel). The *Ossewa-Brandwag*, established in 1939, was an anti-British and pro-German organisation in South Africa during the Second World War and which opposed South African participation in the war. During the early years of World War II Vorster became a general of its paramilitary wing, known as the *Stormjaers* (the Stormtroopers), which was modelled on the Nazi *Sturmabteilung* (the Storm Division or Brown Shirts).

Other than being designated as a place for teaching and learning, nothing about the school made me feel comfortable. There were two other student teachers at the school. I knew both from my Higher Diploma in Education (HDE) class. They, however, did not suffer the same uncertainty of placement or recognition that I did. Their entries into the staff room, or the school foyer did not elicit the same kind of tense confusion that mine did. While they looked the part of a teacher at a historically ‘white’ school, I did not. The frustration and anxiety of the first few days were distressful enough for me to request a placement at another school. I felt compromised and let down. What was my Afrikaans lecturer thinking in placing me at a
school that symbolised the epiphany of Afrikanerdom? Everything about the school resonated with a propagation of apartheid. What was I supposed to learn in a school like this? My complaints to my lecturer fell on deaf ears. He felt confident about his decision, as well as his opinion that I would gain much from the experience. His confidence did not do much for me. But I knew that I needed to find a way to get through the next six weeks, which was the duration of the teaching practical during the second semester. The previous one, during the first semester, I had spent at a ‘coloured’ school.

Each day felt like a mountain to climb. Most of my time centred on me trying not to draw attention to myself. I was petrified of being ‘too visible’, as if someone would suddenly realise, ‘hey, she’s not white!’ My interaction with teachers at the school was limited to that with my mentor–teacher. While always very busy, he was great at offering advice. My time in the staff-room was spent with my head down. While the other two students enjoyed making coffee and chatting in the kitchen, I dared not enter. It was one thing to enter a professional space as an ‘unknown’, and presumably, ‘unwelcome’ intrusion. It was quite another to assume the privilege of sharing in kitchen utensils. It was not just that I had no place at the school. My presence, while surreal to some, like the secretary, was indeed a physical one, and it signalled something much bigger than me. I was a sign of change. It was 1993. I was evidence that apartheid was facing an uncertain future.

I managed to get through those six weeks for only one reason: the learners. Whether because of their youth, or whether my status as a ‘teacher’ afforded me authority, which could not be defied, none of them were ever disrespectful to me. In fact, I was amazed by their exceptionally polite conduct – from greeting and thanking me for lessons, to jumping from the seats to find chalk whenever I ran short.

**Off to another wrong school**

As my HDE year was ending, I had the option of at least three teaching posts. While two were at ‘coloured’ schools, one was at a ‘white’
school. The country was preparing for its first democratic elections; schools had already begun to slowly desegregate in preparation for the inevitability of an apartheid-free society. My discomfort at Protea was not yet a distant memory, but I also knew that something in me had changed, hence my careful consideration of a post at a soon to be ‘historically white’ school. The experience had indeed given me a valuable lesson – that teaching and being a teacher is about learning, and hence, learners. I felt emboldened, ready to become a part of the country’s transition into a new period and milieu of enveloping diversity.

The hopeful acceptance of my first teaching post during the most momentous year of South Africa’s history lasted until I reported for my first day of duty. Unsurprisingly, I encountered the same secretary at the school of my first teaching post in January 1994. Not the same person, but the same persona – the kind who spent most of her interactions with me in carefully worded efforts of reminding me to know my place. In an unwavering tone of condescension, she would find it necessary to remind me about school rules, where and where not to place files, how to make appointments to speak to the principal. While painfully efficient in her assertion of authority over me, she would ‘forget’ to relay messages regarding the cancellation of sports events, or the re-scheduling of meetings. She was more than prepared to assist learners when sent by other (‘white’) teachers when they needed copies made or required stationery. Any learner sent by me, would return with a terse message that she was out of stock, or that I should fetch it myself during break. Her face was a constant contortion of horror and disgust if not at the influx of ‘coloured’ learners into what was an exclusively ‘white’ school just a year before, then at what she clearly perceived as the audaciously intrusive presence of the three newly appointed ‘coloured’ teachers, of which I had the privilege/misfortune of being one.

On the surface, there was a sense of widening expectation and aspiration, a hope for an end to human suffering. It was hard not to get caught in the romance of it all, to be part of such a profound part
of history. I was a part of this – the euphoric witnessing of the end of apartheid, as well as the history leading to it. I had been forced out of my childhood home when I was thirteen years old. By that same time my father had already experienced forced removals, implemented under what was known as the Group Areas Act (Act no. 41 of 1950), twice over. Thousands of people had lost their lives – if not to death, then in conditions of existence that could not be described as living. It is hard to thread words through certain experiences. It is hard to capture what it means to experience not being seen as human, but as something else, perhaps a mistake in colour. The violence inflicted on bodies, who were not ‘white’, lived in many forms and spaces. It is easy to name the violence of dehumanising oppression, it is quite another when it lives in who you are perceived to be. Das (2007: 9) explains that it is not only the violence experienced on an individual’s body, ‘but also the sense that one’s access to context is lost that constitutes a sense of being violated’. Hence, even in the elation and pride of a momentous political accomplishment, I understood that a democracy could not erase the violence – not in those who suffered it, and not in those who perpetrated it.

If I thought that my time as a student had in any way prepared me for what was to come in my first year of teaching, I was wrong. I had naively thought that the ideological displacement I had experienced at Protea High School would somehow equip, even buffer me against the kinds of unease, marginalisation and invisibility of any similar kind of setting. I have subsequently learnt and lived that even when contexts look the same – whether in terms of historical disposition, or teacher and learner demographics – contexts are never the same. Difference emanates not only from different ways of acting and being, but from what those actions and beings evoke and provoke in others. All the pedagogical knowledge, skills and readiness could not prepare me for what awaited me in my first teaching position. Like Protea High, Erica High School3 was reserved for ‘white’ learners.

3 Erica High School is a pseudonym.
and teachers only. But the year in which I started teaching was in 1994, which coincided with South Africa’s transition to a democracy, and hence, the accompanying desegregation of schools. Given the nascency of this transition at the time, most of the learners in my classes were ‘white’. It was quite an absurd situation when one considers that I was teaching learners from the very background with whom I had not been allowed to learn.

The way he turned his back shortly after being introduced to me by the principal suggested that he had no interest in seeing or getting to know me. All ensuing communication between us relied on the least amount of eye contact possible. I would be lying if I said we ever had a conversation or interaction. He did not interact with me; that would imply some sort of inter-relation, or that he deemed me as someone with a voice. The fact that he was the head of the Afrikaans department gave him the unnecessary power he so deeply enjoyed wielding over me. The unannounced classroom visits were as demoralising as his unintelligent instructions that I remove visual images from the grade 8 examination paper, or that I only choose creative writing topics from his approved list. My attempts at any sort of contribution to the Afrikaans department was his cue to dismiss me and my ideas. While the other five ‘white’ teachers actively participated and took the lead in designing materials for the different grades, I was treated like someone who had no understanding of my subject specialisation or teaching. He must have spent endless hours re-marking entire sets of examination scripts, when all he should have been doing was moderate a few. He even went as far as questioning the high marks of learners, raising doubt about my ‘standard of teaching’, even when they were ‘white’, just because they were taught by me. He made no attempt to hide the fact that he did not approve of me. These were my experiences in 1994. Seemingly, the use of ‘standards’ continues to be deployed as a distinction between ‘white’ competence and ‘black’ incompetence (see Jansen, 2004; Soudien & Sayed, 2004; Walker, 2005; Davids, 2019a).

The head of the Afrikaans department was also in charge of the
book-room, where all the textbooks were stored. He carried the seriousness of this responsibility around his neck in the form of a key, which he would hand over with painfully clear instructions that teachers only take the requested books, and not untidy the book-room. Since I was never given the privilege of being handed the key, I (thankfully) escaped any potential accusations of untidying the book-room. I could not be trusted to identify and take the books which I needed, which meant that I was always accompanied by him. I remember laughing at myself for thinking that had I taught any other subject, but languages, my trips to the book-room might have been limited to no more than twice a year – once at the beginning of the year to collect the books, and again at the end of the year, to return them. The fact that I taught English and Afrikaans, meant collecting and returning various sets of novels, plays, poetry anthologies, as well as grammar textbooks throughout the year. That this mindless act would come to warrant so much attention in my life says something about my dreaded interactions with this man. It must have been exhausting for him – feeling compelled to manage me all the time, always suspicious, always waiting. By the time I left the school four years later, I had begun pitying him, his blinkered and entrapped thinking, the simmering frustration and resentment of witnessing apartheid slowly oozing away.

It certainly did not help matters that during my first year I had completed co-authoring an Afrikaans textbook, *Kaperjol*. I had been invited to be part of this collaborative effort on the recommendation of my Afrikaans lecturer during my pre-service teaching year. There was a dire need for an abandonment of the old textbooks (in most subjects), not only because of its outdated content, but for its racist overtones. The publication of the textbook coincided with the introduction of the country’s new outcomes-based curriculum, and as such, offered a fresh take on content and teaching approaches, reflective of an inclusive democratic society. It was an exciting project, working with different and more experienced teachers, curriculum experts and copy-editors, and I was incredibly proud
just to be included as an author. While most of the schools in the province and country opted to prescribe *Kaperjol*, my school did not – even when I indicated that as an author I could secure a generous discount. Instead, the head of the Afrikaans department insisted that the school continues to use the same textbooks used during apartheid and made it clear that he had no interest in implementing the new nationally prescribed curriculum. As I reflect upon him now, I almost admire his unabashed racism: he knew who he was and what he stood for and had no qualms in making sure that, in his eyes, I know what I did or had to say simply did not matter. I am reminded of Ahmed’s (2004) observation, that if we recognise something such as racism, then we also offer a definition of that which we recognise. To her, recognition produces rather than simply finds its object; recognition delineates the boundaries of what it recognises as given.

Over the years, while working in different educational spaces, I would come to realise that in many ways it is easier to deal with this kind of brazenness than it is to be misled into the subtleties of facades of inauthentic interactions and conversations.

On most days, it was possible to compartmentalise and block out the actions and speech of the head of the Afrikaans department. Although I initially considered bringing up the matter with the principal, it became apparent that he might not necessarily be equipped to respond or deal with the situation. South Africa’s newly ‘opened’ schools were as uncharted to him, as they were to all other school leaders. While generally cordial and highly professional, I seriously doubted his capacity to know how to respond to my allegations of racism. My initial interview with him when I had applied for the position was functional and brief. He called me later the same day to offer me the post. As a ‘white’ male, his lifeworld had ill-prepared him to understand or relate to the experiences of marginalisation and exclusion that naturally accompany the lives of oppressed and disenfranchised citizens in South Africa. So, instead, I threw myself into my teaching, my learners, their dramatic teenage angsts, which typify teenagers across the spectra of divisions,
apartheid was so intent on safeguarding. Their youthful vigour and insatiable, energetic curiosity served as continuous confirmation that I belonged in teaching. Their diversity in terms of race, religion and culture, coupled with profound disparate historical contexts – enforced through apartheid legislation – made for unprecedented teaching and learning encounters and opportunities.

I thrived on it, even while suspecting that the vibrancy of a dramatically shifting political context might not be enough to counter or dilute the scars of an apartheid society. There were also wonderfully light moments, such as a phone call from a ‘white’ mother urgently wanting to speak to me about her sixteen-year-old daughter’s blossoming romance with a ‘coloured youngster’. My suspicions that she was unaware of my own ‘coloured’ identity were confirmed when I saw the expression on her face the next day. Her planned conversation rapidly changed to one on her daughter’s academic progress – a somewhat redundant conversation, given that her daughter was the top learner in the grade. Her obvious awkward embarrassment aside, I was heartened to know that her daughter had either not mentioned the race of her class teacher, or her mother had forgotten or had become confused as to which teacher was the ‘coloured’ one. I could not know how much this realisation would impact on my teaching in later years – that is, that some learners or students simply see teachers as teachers; they are unbothered by race, religion, ethnicity or culture; they are only interested in your teaching.

By the end of my second year of teaching, the learner demographics had shifted radically from being an exclusively ‘white’ school to a predominantly ‘coloured’ one. Learner migration refers to the movement of learners from ‘black’ townships on the periphery of cities to former ‘white’, ‘coloured’ and ‘Indian’ schools situated in relatively more affluent areas (Pampallis, 2003). The abandonment of the Group Areas Act facilitated rapid migrations of families across racially designated residential areas. It is not just that communities in South Africa lived in separate areas, and hence did not interact.
It is that the measure of infrastructural and recreational support assigned to an area was determined by its racial occupation. Those designated to the lowest levels of ‘blackness’ received the least amount of service delivery, compounded by a deliberate attitude of indifference. The potential for post-apartheid migration is mostly defined by financial capacity. The desire to do so is based either on a nostalgic and restorative return to homes from which people were forcibly removed, or to live in environments that are habitable, safe and close to places of employment. The forced removals actioned through the Group Areas Act did not only expel people from family homes, it also displaced them into far-flung patches of land, devoid of communal living and recreational facilities, and far from the employment hub of the city centre.

The surrounding area of Erica High has historical associations of immense residential upheaval for ‘coloured’ communities. It also has connotations of a bustling middle-class community. The rapid change in residential demography was both accompanied and enabled by ‘white’ families opting to move to the ‘northern suburbs’, which were considered to be ‘more white’. This perception is no longer the case. Moreover, the school is near a railway line, which was seen as expediting the influx of learners across racial lines. Seemingly, the more ‘coloured’ and ‘black’ learners accessed the school, the more ‘white’ learners exited, often in the direction of what was becoming an intense proliferation of private schools (including faith-based schools) in post-apartheid South Africa. With the scrapping of the Group Areas Act (no. 41 of 1950), similar contextual changes were unfolding in the surrounding residential areas. Communities previously prohibited from living in better resourced and serviced areas migrated from far-flung apartheid-erected areas. To some, this migration signalled a reclamation of historical dispossession. To others, financial mobility ensured a smooth facilitation into the gains of a democracy.

Despite the evident residential and demographic shifts that happened across South Africa in the early days of democracy,
these shifts, relatively speaking, remain minimal. The historical disenfranchised situatedness of the overwhelming majority of ‘black’ and ‘coloured’ communities remain unchanged, regardless of widespread political and policy reform. Because of this contextual reality, the implied desegregation of newly ‘opened’ schools, is neither significant, nor representative of the myriad policy-suggested forms of integration. Although it is possible to discern definitive patterns of migration across historically racialised schools from ‘black’ to ‘coloured’ and ‘Indian’, and from ‘black’, ‘coloured’ and ‘Indian’ to ‘white’ schools, which have resulted, in some instances, in complete shifts in learner demographics at some schools, the actual number represents but a small slice of the overall learner pie (Woolman & Fleisch, 2006; McKinney, 2010). Furthermore, regardless of the immense diversity in terms of race, culture, ethnicity and language that clearly exists at several South African schools, these schools have not succeeded in creating and cultivating integrated learning and social spaces (Naidoo et al., 2018; Soudien & McKinney, 2016).

There are numerous and complex issues and tensions at play, some of which can be conceived of in terms of external exclusionary measures, and others that take shape through practices of internal exclusion. On the one hand, schools employ policies of charging exorbitant fees, select the language(s) of teaching and learning, and demarcate feeder zones to keep particular communities of learners at bay. The steady increase in school fees, for example, provides critical insights into the relationality between race and class, and how this serves to perpetuate inequalities (Davids, 2020).

**Desegregation is still about race**

First signs of the rumbling tension among teachers at Erica High reared at the beginning of 1995. South Africa had adopted its newly designed flag at the same time as the country’s first democratic elections on 27 April 1994. The new flag, depicting colours of the South African Republic, the Union, as well as the African National
Congress, replaced the old flag which had been in use since 1928.

Generally, while historically ‘white’ schools proudly displayed the South African flag during apartheid, many were slow in adopting the new flag and its accompanying symbolism. Erica was one such school. Week after week, as we gathered for school assembly, I would cast my eye in the direction of the flag, still seeing the old one. By November of 1994, the only three ‘coloured’ staff members decided to raise the matter with the principal. He tried to minimise the significance of it and offered to discuss it at a meeting with senior staff members, which, by implication, excluded the three of us. I found his response perplexing, not only in his attempts to discount the flag as a symbol of ‘white’ supremacy, but in seemingly failing to see the necessity of replacing the old flag, in line with state regulations. Instead, he relied on the assertion that the old flag was not prohibited. Its illegality would only come into effect 25 years later, in 2019, when Judge Phineas Mojapelo ruled that any ‘gratuitous’ display of the old flag amounted to hate speech, racial discrimination and harassment under the Equality Act. In line with the thinking of anyone who comprehended the true state and experience of the apartheid regime’s objectives, Judge Mojapelo ruled that:

The dominant meaning attributable to the Old Flag, both domestically and internationally, is that it is for the majority of the South African population a symbol that immortalises the period of a system of racial segregation, racial oppression through apartheid, of a crime against humanity and of South Africa as an international pariah state that dehumanised the black population. (Ampofo-Anti, 2019)

Three weeks after our initial meeting, the principal informed the staff during a daily staff briefing, that after consulting with senior staff members, it was decided that both the new and old flag would be on display in the school hall, and at all formal ceremonies. This, to his
mind, would represent a compromise between South Africa’s history and present. There were three very unhappy staff members, none of whom were ‘white’. I restated the argument made to him three weeks earlier that the old flag was a painful reminder to those who had suffered under apartheid; that it symbolised oppression and hatred; that, as a school community, we had a responsibility to cultivate a space where learners and teachers from diverse backgrounds could come together without the tensions induced by and presence of hateful symbols. As expected, my sentiments were not welcomed by most of my colleagues.

Others, like one of the history teachers, were at pains to explain that the old flag was a cherished symbol to ‘white’ Afrikaners, which, according to her, should not necessarily be equated with apartheid. She stressed that the views of the majority (of the staff) should be respected, apparently forgetting, or ignoring, the fact that the majority of the country had voted for the ANC, and a democracy, characterising severance with apartheid ideology and all of its symbols. Admittedly, I was more disheartened by the silences of (‘white’) colleagues, who previously had offered their support of the removal of the flag in private conversations with me, than with those who saw no problem in proudly displaying an apartheid symbol. If the principal thought that the annual school break three weeks later would somehow subdue the simmering tension, which had manifested from his announcement, he was wrong.

The new cohort of grade 8s in the new year saw a significant increase in the number of ‘coloured’ learners. Residential migratory patterns across historically segregated areas had a significant impact on school demographics in South Africa, forcing some of them to carefully recompose admission policies directed at keeping certain communities at bay – if not through race, then through finances. Proximity to major transport hubs or routes proved to be especially problematic for several historically ‘white’ schools. Ironically, the skewed privileging of effective transport systems in historically ‘white’ areas ensured easy access to those areas for members of communities
who could not afford to relocate. Erica High could neither escape its rapidly changing residential base, nor its unfortunate proximity to a railway station.

By the time I resigned from my post early in 1998, the school was predominantly ‘coloured’, with a significant increase in ‘black’ learners. A change, such as this, is immediately accompanied by judgements of falling standards – the implicit contention being an association between quality and whiteness, as opposed to no-quality and blackness. Significantly, the predominance of the learner shift was not reflected in the staff demographics. Any new posts, at least during my tenure at the school, were exclusively filled by ‘white’ teachers. The new year also started with lines clearly drawn between the three ‘coloured’ staff members and the rest of the all-‘white’ staff. The issue of the flag had not been put to rest. I am not sure whether I would have arrived at the same decision to resign had I not taken maternity leave midway through all the tensions at school. I am also not certain of the extent to which the death of my father a mere week before the birth of my first daughter impacted me. I had planned to return, and I did for about three months, until one morning while driving to work, it suddenly dawned on me that I no longer wanted to be a part of this school.

There was a fractured-ness about the school. Collegial relationships had deteriorated into interactions of mistrust and unspoken frustrations. While emanating from a flag-dispute, the arising conflict laid bare unspoken experiences of racism, of not being seen as human beings, drawing hard lines between ‘them’ (‘white’ teachers) and ‘us’ (‘coloured’ teachers). Even in my moments of anger and disappointment, I recognised that most of the teachers and the principal simply did not understand what was often described as an ‘unnecessary fuss’. After all, it was just a flag. So, what’s the harm? It is not unusual to find an unwillingness on the part of certain teachers and school leaders to break from the past by persisting with practices that continue to be couched in a language of authoritarianism and alienation (Moloi, 2007; Ngcobo & Tikly, 2008). Matters reached a
tipping point when after yet another assembly of having to sit on a stage with the old flag poised next to the new one, one of the teachers remarked that this was ‘their school’, and that if ‘the “coloured” teachers did not like how things were done, they should leave’. I remember this statement as clearly as when I first heard it in the staffroom. I remember it because it led to such an unbearable staff atmosphere, that one of the ‘coloured’ teachers reported the matter to the district education department.

About two weeks later the staff was informed that we were required to attend a compulsory two-day conflict resolution session, mediated by a facilitator, appointed by the education department. Whether it was the fact that we had only two days, or the fact that the change in our society was just too new and raw, or whether my ‘white’ colleagues either did not want to care, or did not know how to care about what it meant to live as an oppressed person, or whether the facilitator was simply not equipped enough to adequately manage the volatility of the conflict, the session did not resolve anything. Sharing our perspectives had not only left both sides feeling emotionally exposed, but more intent upon and hardened in their own perspectives. Whatever facades of collegiality existed prior to the conflict resolution session had dissipated by the time we returned to the school.

As the antithesis of segregation, desegregation is meant to undo not only racial segregation, but the power, or in the case of South Africa, the law, which confers the separation. Apartheid saw the establishment of 19 racially and ethnically separated education departments. Not only would South Africa’s children not learn together, but the racially differentiated funding allocation to ‘white’, ‘Indian’, ‘coloured’ and ‘black’ schools would ensure a foundation of educational, social and economic inequity – an imbalance critical to ensuring the success of the ‘white’ supremacist project, and a foundation that would extend long beyond the political demise of apartheid. Embodied in the Bantu Education Act of 1953 are the beliefs of apartheid architect, Hendrik Verwoerd, who maintained:
There is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live. (McGregor 2013)

Ushered in by ‘A Policy Framework for Education and Training’ (DoE, 1994), public schools in South Africa embarked on a two-pronged process of curriculum renewal by replacing Christian National Education with an outcomes-based education and desegregation. While accompanied by much rhetoric of ‘open schools’ for all learners, the ideals of desegregation are far removed from what is practically possible within school contexts. Unlike desegregation in public spaces, such as restaurants or hotels, which might incur (temporary or permanent) economic losses, desegregation in schools, observes Howard Thurman (1966), attacks the foundations of society. Segregation does not only signal a regulation of access and participation, but it is also, says Thurman (1966), ‘the exercise of raw power by one group of people over the lives of another group of people’, ingrained and guaranteed by economic, political, social and religious sanctions. What desegregated schools imply, therefore, is the setting into motion of a new kind of society, where the privileging of one group and its interests are not privileged over another.

Desegregation in South Africa has not unfolded in ways that might have been envisaged. Presumably, there was some sort of expectation that all schools would suddenly be open to all learners. But how could this be? While promulgated by democratic principles, in practice, and in living, South African society remains deeply seeped in the residual dehumanisation of apartheid. So, no, all schools have become microcosms of the diversity which is South Africa. On the one hand, the majority of historically disenfranchised schools (‘black’, ‘coloured’ and ‘Indian’) have retained their ‘disadvantaged’ status. On the other hand, in most school contexts, where desegregation
has occurred, it has been met with a combination of fear, suspicion and hostility, and untamed objectives to assimilate diversity into the dominant look and culture of the school (Davids, 2018b).

My short time at Erica High was tumultuous and unsettling. Sentimental notions of ‘togetherness’ and ‘reconciliation’, as espoused by Nelson Mandela, dissolved into shadows of suspicion and guardedness. Yet the pleasure I derived from my teaching and those I taught – regardless of race or ethnicity – was undeniable. I have never stopped cherishing the lives of the young people who touched mine during this time. The deeper the tensions among the staff, the more I sheltered in my classroom. Isolating myself became a means of self-preservation. By my third year at the school, the principal had resigned to take up a post at a private college. I was unsurprised; it had become increasingly hard for him to know how to lead and manage a diverse school, let alone know how to begin to respond to the obvious staff tensions and conflicts. It was clear to me that he had absolutely no point of reference from which to even begin to understand what it meant to live on the under-side of his oppression-free and privileged life.

From a broader perspective, informed by 27 years of so-called ‘open schools’ in democratic South Africa, I do not believe that principals, teachers, or policymakers, for that matter, had any idea of how to manage newly desegregated school spaces. In most cases, historically advantaged schools continue to be strained sites of racial tension and ‘othering’, fostering harmful and undignified experiences of worthlessness. Sites of harmful ‘othering’ and alienation. There is seemingly no shortage of racist vitriol, spewed by learners and teachers alike (Davids, 2018c; 2019c). My experiences of and at the school were certainly not unique; friends at other schools had similar, if not more disaffecting, experiences, resulting in several of them exiting the teaching profession altogether.

As in all cases, the decision to desegregate is a political one. The massive policy reform, which included the eventual iterations of four curricula over a 27-year period, never quite understood the criticality
of attending to teachers and their identities in a post-apartheid climate. The government turned to Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) as a replacement for Christian National Education (CNE) – an education system (implemented in 1948) which was based on a particular Afrikaner form of Calvinistic principles. The massive curriculum overhaul took centre stage among the dissolution of nineteen different education departments, established during apartheid, directed at different racial and ethnic groups, and with different curricula. A new national curriculum for all South African learners was viewed as critical to cultivating a new democratic identity and citizenship. Instead of the authoritarian positioning of the teacher in CNE, OBE placed learners at the centre of their learning by encouraging their participation, and critical engagement. There was an overwhelming focus on getting the myriad of education policies right without asking the much-needed question of who is expected to implement the policies. Presumptions of a generic and abiding teacher were incredibly short-sighted. The prohibition of an apartheid system has not translated into an eradication of apartheid thinking or acting. I would, therefore, concur with Thurman (1966), that even if desegregation is facilitated by changes in policies and regulations, integration can never be achieved as an end but must emerge as an experience after the fact of coming together. South Africans have never had a chance to come together. Policies happened before we had a chance to know what it would be like to step out of residential, communal and political silos.

For some teachers, like those at Erica High, the leap of teaching only ‘white’ learners at the end of 1993, to having a diverse class six weeks later, was much more than some of their political leanings could tolerate. In the absence of acquiring a renewed understanding of a socially just society, one devoid of racism and its vile language, the only changes these teachers would have been capable of are the ones that they revealed – a forced preparedness to desegregate, but not to integrate. As explained by Judith Butler in an interview with George Yancy (2015: 8), ‘Whiteness is less a property of skin than a
social power reproducing its dominance in both explicit and implicit ways. When whiteness is a practice of superiority over minorities, it monopolises the power of destroying or demeaning bodies of colour.’ Although desegregation can be legislated, integration cannot. Integration, as Thurman (1966) reminds us, requires an openness not only in terms of live options regarding all facilities, but is concerned with how we understand and come to our human relations.

Postcolonialism as a product of human experience

I don’t think I fully comprehended the immense challenges South Africa faced as a post-apartheid society. I knew the effects of living during apartheid, followed by the unsettling experiences of crossing a literal colour line at Erica High. I knew the emotions of it, but I had no language through which to make sense of these experiences. Everything at the time was just too new, untraversed, and playing out against a political backdrop where reconciliation and hope seemingly loomed large. It would only be years later that I would begin to grasp the discursive entrenchment of the production and reproduction of existing hegemonies, such as those imposed by colonialism and apartheid. What does it mean for a society to transition into a postcolonial phase? For some, postcolonialism infers resistance to the colonial at any time – literally, asserts Young (2009), in the case of decolonised societies, and ideologically for still colonised societies. While Young (2009: 13) acknowledges that the term postcolonial will certainly always involve the idea of resistance, he prefers to ‘preserve the historical specificity of the term, and to think of the postcolonial as involving what we might simply refer to as the aftermath of the colonial.’ The aftermath, no doubt, is as wrapped up in the politics of transformation – such as the desegregation of schools – as it is, ‘simply the product of human experience’ (Young, 2009: 13).

If the aftermath of colonialism and apartheid lives on (and hides) in our human experiences, then it follows that we can only undo the
aftermath through our experiences. If postcolonialism provides a language of and for those who seem not to belong, of those whose knowledges and histories are not allowed to count (Young, 2009), then it helps to use that language not only in making our experiences known, but in inviting others into our own experiences. In this regard, connected very closely to an autoethnographic approach, is the potential of storytelling to begin to deconstruct the estranged and vilified understandings apartheid succeeded in inculcating into South African society. The experiences described in this chapter are not historical; they are ever-present in our schools, where teachers relegated to minority group status continue to struggle for recognition as competent pedagogical authorities. The appointment of ‘black’ teachers at historically ‘white’ schools remains a painfully slow undertaking. Jansen (2007: 30) contends that incoming ‘black’ teachers ‘are already framed in ways that disempower them, and the same nurturing and accommodation that is so readily made for novice ‘white’ teachers seldom apply to novice black teachers.’ Spaces – the public sphere, schools and universities – acquire the ‘skin’ of the bodies that inhabit them; ‘institutions’ as orientation devices take the shape of ‘what’ resides within them (Ahmed, 2007: 157). When we describe institutions as ‘being white’ (institutional whiteness), explains Ahmed (2007: 157), ‘we are pointing to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather and cohere to form the edges of such spaces.’

The deployment of policies cannot reach the lived experiences of teachers or learners. Inasmuch as ‘education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories’, so, too, teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other’s stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990: 2). Neither teachers nor learners speak with one voice. There are some things that are true for some, but not so for others. There are ways of seeing the world, which are unseen to others. We are not fully of each other’s worlds, which means that our intimacy is incomplete (Lugones & Spelman, 1983).
This is because, based on our pre-existing ideas and judgements of others, we reconstruct each other in the images or myths that we have of each other. But if we are to reconceive the way we engage with each other, learn how to be with each other and re-find each other in the aftermath, then we must cultivate spaces for us each to give account of ourselves. This is partly what makes us human – our capacity to articulate our experiences.